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The Targeting of Infrastructure by America's Violent Far-Right

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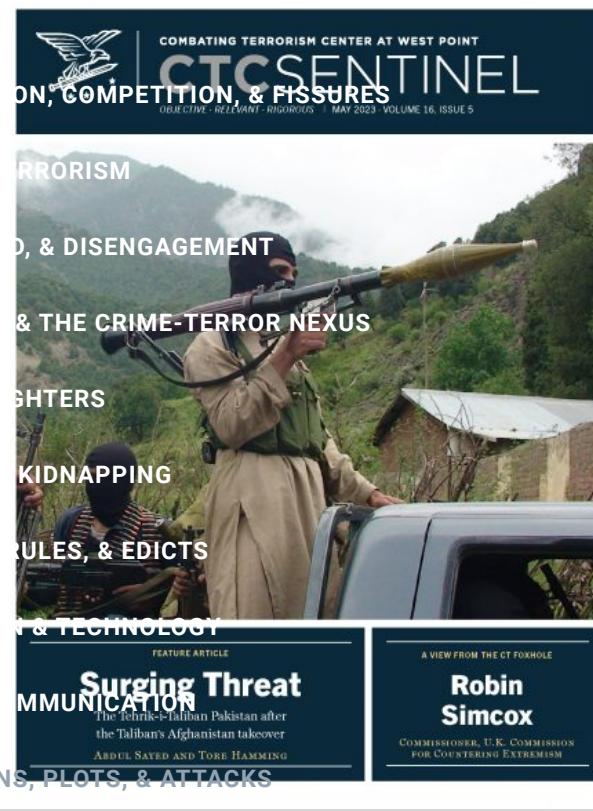
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Abstract: Violent far-right extremists have targeted critical infrastructure to radicalize and recruit members, promulgate their narratives, and sow chaos, all in an attempt to precipitate the destruction of political systems and society writ large. Accelerationist ideology, conspiracy theories, disinformation, and far-right extremist narratives have played a key role in the prioritization of critical infrastructure as a target for the violent far-right. The intersections of these ideologies and narratives have led to complex attacks on power grids and the targeting of telecommunications systems by far-right extremists. The increased focus and attacks on critical infrastructure by far-right extremists has the potential to wreak extensive, multifaceted societal disruption and damage, impacting communications, the economy, mobility, and basic human necessities.

In early February 2023, federal authorities announced the arrest of Brandon Russell and Sarah Clendaniel, both charged with conspiracy to damage a U.S. energy facility.¹ Russell, one of the founding members of the neo-Nazi group known as the Atomwaffen Division (AWD),² and Clendaniel planned to use automatic weapons to attack an electrical grid in Baltimore, Maryland.

The plot was far from an outlier, as terrorists and violent extremists have long sought to target critical infrastructure. Between 1970 and 2015, according to a study by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), there were approximately 2,055 attacks targeting critical infrastructure just in the United States alone.³ In recent years, it has been largely far-right extremists in the United States who have increasingly targeted critical infrastructure. As noted in a report by Ilana Krill and Bennet Clifford, “between 2016 and 2022, white supremacist plots targeting energy systems dramatically increased in frequency. 13 individuals associated with the movement were arrested and charged in federal court with planning attacks on the energy sector; 11 of these attack planners were charged after 2020.”⁴ As Brian Harrell, a former Assistant Secretary of Infrastructure Protection at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, has noted, “extremists on the left and right continue to fantasize about attacks on critical infrastructure. This is a growing trend here in the United States, but also globally. Industry owns the infrastructure, so it’s imperative that the private sector stay coordinated with law enforcement and National Security partners.”⁵

VIOLENT FAR-RIGHT

Although recent examples display the violent far-right’s prominence and increased focus on targeting critical infrastructure, far-right extremists have historically been far from the sole actors in this particular threat landscape. According to a study by START, far-left and anarchist violent extremists were responsible for 14 percent of attacks against government facilities and 74 percent of attacks on the emergency services sector between 1979 and 2015, with the height of their activity taking place in the 1970s.⁶ Generally, the scale and scope of attacks by far-left and anarchist violent extremists in the past decade seems eclipsed by other forms of violent extremism, particularly in terms of human casualties and frequency of attacks.⁷ Yet, with the wider scope of influence of accelerationist ideologies among extreme right-wing groups, coupled with potential shifts rightward in the U.S. political landscape, such trends may change. On top of the threat posed by the violent far-right, the potential for extreme far-left and anarchist actors to return to historic practices of targeting critical infrastructure, such as attacks committed by the Weather Underground and the New World Liberation Front, renders understanding how these actors interact with and are influenced by accelerationist ideology critical.⁸

This article will explore why and how far-right extremists have targeted critical infrastructure, including the role and application of accelerationist ideology, conspiracy theories and disinformation involving 5G networks and

COVID-19, and other far-right extremist narratives in motivating violent far-right actors to prioritize and commit such attacks. From complex plots against power grids to attacks on telecommunications systems, this article demonstrates how far-right extremists have targeted infrastructure to radicalize and recruit members, promulgate their narratives, and sow chaos, with the potential for extensive societal disruption and damage.

Accelerationism and Infrastructure

The U.S. government has taken notice of far-right extremists' renewed interest in targeting critical infrastructure, releasing numerous bulletins and warnings to educate the public and communicate transparently about the nature of the threat. According to CNN reporting, in late April 2023, a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) bulletin noted that domestic violent extremists in the United States are increasingly sharing tactics with each other, trading best practices related to how to attack electric power stations and other forms of critical infrastructure.⁹ In February 2022, DHS released a National Terrorism Advisory System (NTAS) Bulletin noting the following: "Domestic violent extremists have also viewed attacks against U.S. critical infrastructure as a means to create chaos and advance ideological goals, and have recently aspired to disrupt U.S. electric and communications critical infrastructure, including by spreading false or misleading narratives about 5G cellular technology."¹⁰

One of the primary drivers of this increased focus is the growing popularity of accelerationism among extreme far-right and white supremacist groups, the ideology that influenced Russell and his Atomwaffen Division co-founders and that continues to contribute to far-right extremist radicalization. "Accelerationism is an ideologically agnostic doctrine of violent and non-violent actions taken to exploit contradictions intrinsic to a political system to 'accelerate' its destruction through the friction caused by its features."¹¹ Atomwaffen has since collapsed, replaced by the National Socialist Order (NSO), yet was driven by the same worldview as other nodes in the accelerationist global network.¹² Militant accelerationism, in particular, advocates for political violence and terrorism to physically destroy society as it currently exists.¹³ Accelerationists believe that lone actors can engage in acts of mass violence to catalyze a broader conflict within society.¹⁴ In that worldview, targeting critical infrastructure is viewed as an important means of destroying society and a catalytic predecessor to the ensuing chaos and anarchy desired. It is little surprise then that Russell reportedly kept a framed picture of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh on his dresser.¹⁵

So-called "neo-Luddites" or "technophobes"—many of whom have been inspired by the writings of the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski—have developed an obsession with 5G wireless networks and towers.¹⁶ Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, among other countries, have experienced individuals and small groups attacking telecommunications infrastructure, especially cell phone towers.¹⁷ Over time and with enough

momentum, this could evolve into a global movement motivated by an aversion to technology and all of the perceived ills that emerging tech contributes toward, including the perception that robotics will be a source of job loss for entire sections and industries. Recent declarations by companies like IBM that they will freeze hiring for jobs that may be performed by artificial intelligence (AI) give an initial indication of the potential impacts on the workforce.¹⁸ As AI becomes inextricably linked with the facets of everyday life, violent groups could seek to push individuals to engage in acts of terrorism as a means of fighting against what they see as the total domination of, and growing dependence upon, technology in modern society.¹⁹ Attacks on 5G wireless towers will be covered in more detail below, but it remains a growing concern for counterterrorism practitioners.



Power pylons (Christian Charisius/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images)

Complex Plots and Attacks Against Power Grids

Several cases within the United States speak directly to the nature of the growing threat posed by violent extremists to critical infrastructure. In 2013, in San Jose, California, an attack on PG&E Corp.'s Metcalf transmission substation knocked it offline. But the attack was not random, nor was it amateurish in nature. On the contrary, the plot involved multiple snipers firing for nearly 20 minutes at an electrical substation. Before escaping undetected, the assailants disabled 17 transformers that carried power to Silicon Valley. At the time, Chairman of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission Jon Wellinghoff called the attack "the most significant incident of domestic terrorism involving the grid that has ever occurred."²⁰ In the attack, more than 100 rounds were fired from high-powered rifles in what was described as a "military-style" raid.²¹ In late August 2014, the same substation was struck again.²²

In June 2020, a federal grand jury indicted two individuals for violations of federal law for conspiracy to damage and destroy U.S. government buildings and property, in addition to a public utility installation.²³ Those charged—Stephen T. Parshall, Andrew Lynam, and William L. Loomis—were self-proclaimed members of the Boogaloo movement.^a The Boogaloo movement, or "Boogaloo Bois," is "best conceptualized as a decentralized, anti-authority movement composed of a diverse range of actors mobilized in part by adherents' belief that they are following in the footsteps of the United States' founders and participating in a revolution against tyranny."²⁴ Within the Boogaloo movement there has been an accelerationist faction that has frequently discussed targeting law enforcement officials, political figures, and critical infrastructure.²⁵

In July 2020, there was an attempt to disrupt the power grid in Pennsylvania using two DJI Mavic 2 drones to create a short circuit. The drone crashed before it could cause major damage, but the perpetrator was never apprehended.²⁶ Between 2015 and 2019, two dozen nuclear reactors and fuel storage sites in the United States suffered from at least 57 drone incursions.²⁷

In August 2021, several individuals were arrested and charged with conspiracy to damage the property of an energy facility in the United States. Paul James Kryscuk, Liam Collins, Jordan Duncan, and Joseph Maurino "researched, discussed, and reviewed at length a previous attack on a power grid by an unknown group" and ultimately sought to use explosives "to burn through and destroy power transformers."^{28 b} A list of over a dozen targets was discovered with transformers or substations in Idaho and surrounding states indicated. Two of the individuals charged, Collins and Duncan, are former U.S. Marines previously stationed at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.²⁹ In December 2022, an attack on two substations in Moore County, North Carolina, cut power to thousands of people, the latest in a series of attacks against critical infrastructure. Since 2014, there have been approximately 600 electric emergency

incidents and disturbances cause by suspected and confirmed physical attacks and vandalism against the electrical grid.³⁰

Violent extremist actors are not the only ones interested in utilizing the advancement of commercialized technology such as drones. The 2023 Annual Threat Assessment by the U.S. intelligence community warned that “foreign intelligence services are adopting cutting-edge technologies—from advanced cyber tools to unmanned systems to enhanced technical surveillance equipment—that improve their capabilities and challenge U.S. defenses. Much of this technology is available commercially, providing a shortcut for previously unsophisticated services to become legitimate threats.”³¹ Attacks need not be successful to disrupt critical services; the sighting of a drone brought flights to a standstill at London’s Heathrow airport in 2019, demonstrating the potential for chaos and damage in the event of a malicious attack.³² Prior to that, in 2018, a sighting of two drones forced London’s Gatwick airport to shut down for about 33 hours and the cancellation of more than 1,000 flights affecting more than 140,000 passengers.³³ Beyond the immediate disruption and cost, it generated significant anxiety among the public and security officials about aviation security.

As drones become more commonly used in everyday life—for example, if Amazon begins delivering products via drone—this will offer more cover and concealment for nefarious state and non-state actors to use drones for malicious purposes. As such, one should expect an uptick in drone incursions around critical infrastructure. This emerging threat has garnered the attention of the U.N. Security Council, which in December 2022 issued the Delhi Declaration³⁴ of non-binding guiding principles for states, many of whom are working with U.N. experts, to develop a globally agreed framework to manage the terrorism threat posed by new and emerging technologies.

COVID-19, Conspiracies, and Disinformation

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about many challenges, including the proliferation of conspiracy theories and disinformation narratives that eroded trust in public health institutions and practices, enhanced anti-government sentiments among populations, and cast unfounded blame onto minorities, government officials, healthcare workers, and others. One only has to look at the increase in anti-Asian hate crimes in the United States³⁵ or the widespread anti-COVID measures protests in Canada and Europe in 2021, such as the “Freedom Convoy” protests,³⁶ to discern the very real and dangerous implications of false or misleading information online for the security of communities, including people and infrastructure.

Conspiracy theories and disinformation narratives have existed throughout human history. However, the uncertainty the pandemic brought, coupled with modern information and communications technologies, the

penetration of social media as well as large swaths of Western populations spending the majority of their time at home and online, combined to create an unprecedented reach and captive audience for online conspiracy theories.

Some of these conspiracy theories and disinformation narratives motivated extremists and radicalized individuals to carry out acts of violence, including those targeting critical infrastructure. In 2020, there was a wave of attacks targeting telecommunication facilities in Europe, the United Kingdom, and North America—largely triggered by conspiracy theories and disinformation revolving around the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁷ Among accelerationist groups and ideology, a plethora of narratives frequently identify critical infrastructure—especially nuclear facilities and energy pipelines—as key targets to accelerate the collapse of society. It is key to understand the role disinformation and conspiracy theories play in motivating and radicalizing violent extremists to attack critical infrastructure and the threat that poses to society. Moreover, as conspiracy-driven narratives become repeated and endorsed by politicians and public figures, they become more mainstream, and are likely to boost the threat across the United States, Europe, and beyond.

The 5G Bogeyman

One conspiracy theory that has caused significant damage to infrastructure in the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe is the one alleging a false correlation between 5G telecommunications infrastructure, especially cellular towers, and COVID-19. The conspiracy theory became particularly widespread on social media in the early days of the global pandemic in 2020.

There were different strands of the conspiracy theory, ranging from unfounded claims that the origin of the virus from Wuhan made sense because 5G was first rolled out there to claims that the virus was deliberately spread so that 5G technology could quickly be installed worldwide and profit the “elites.”³⁸ The conspiracy theory was frequently spread online through the use of maps indicating the construction or installation of an alleged 5G cellular tower, overlayed with the spread of COVID-19, insinuating to the consumer of the false and misleading information that the use of 5G infrastructure was causing or spreading the virus.³⁹

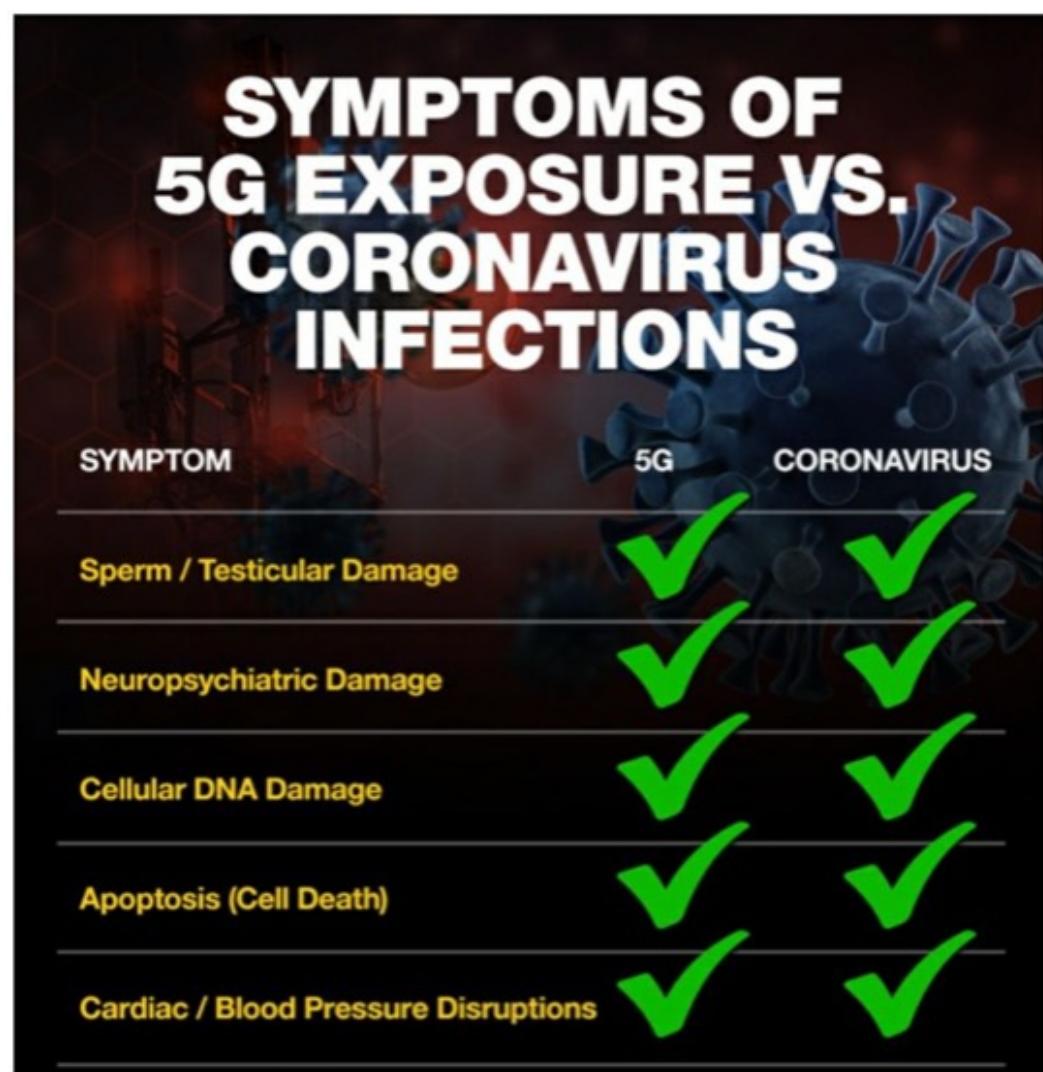


Figure 1: Example of 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theory content that circulated online in April 2020 (Source: Telegram)

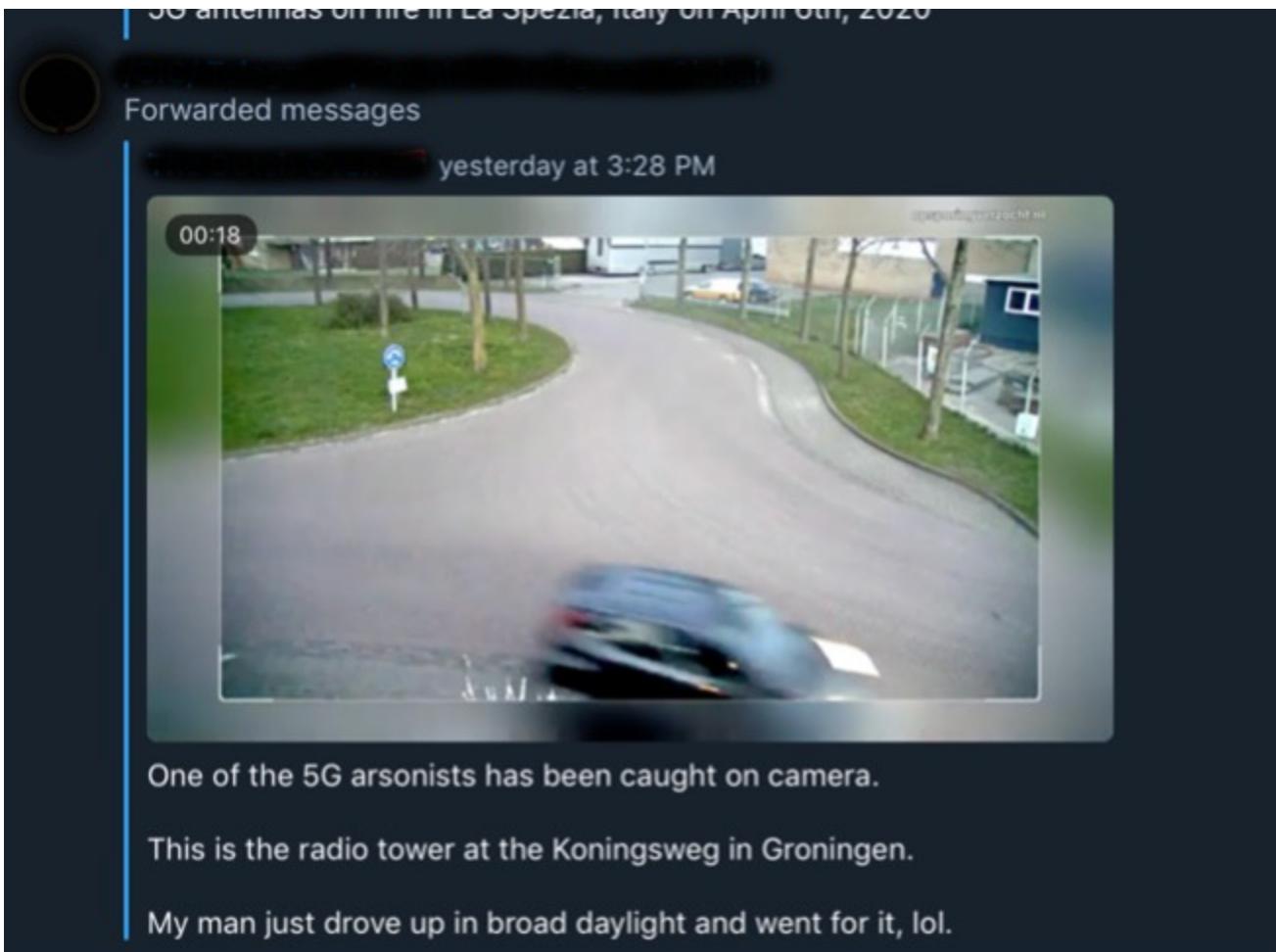
One of the biggest challenges when studying conspiracy-driven terrorism motivated by disinformation is to identify the causal relationship between the narrative and the perpetration of an act of violence. When studying manifestos of far-right extremist terrorists, for example, it is evident that they often have been influenced by a plethora of conspiracy theories (e.g., the Great Replacement, the Great Reset, and/or anti-Semitic conspiracy theories) and adopted an array of disinformation narratives (anti-LGBTQ+, election fraud, anti-establishment, climate change,

and/or human trafficking disinformation), often combining elements from various strands. Indeed, scholars such as Bruce Hoffman have argued that the world is witnessing “ideological convergence” within the far-right extremist milieu, where perpetrators pick and choose from seemingly contradictory ideologies, conspiracy theories, and disinformation narratives to justify violence.⁴⁰ A February 2022 Terrorism Advisory Bulletin by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security warned that “the United States remains in a heightened threat environment fueled by several factors, including an online environment filled with false or misleading narratives and conspiracy theories.”⁴¹

It is important to note that conspiracy theories as well as dis- and misinformation centered around telecommunications technology, including 5G technology, has existed throughout the 20th and the 21st centuries in different waves depending on technological advancements. The 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theory and the different disinformation narratives stemming from it, however, mainstreamed these false and misleading notions to an unprecedented level. One study on COVID-19 conspiracy theories found that between January 2020 and November 2021, English-language tweets concerning the 5G conspiracy theory numbered 326,035, with the majority of those appearing in April 2020.⁴² On April 4 and 5, 2020, the “5G coronavirus” and “5G map” search terminologies peaked on Google among worldwide users, but searches for these terms on Google had dramatically decreased by the end of the month. An investigation by *The New York Times* found 487 Facebook communities concerned with the specific conspiracy theory, with nearly 500,000 followers added to these Facebook communities centered on 5G and COVID-19 in the first two weeks of April 2020.

Although broad public interest in the conspiracy theory seemingly dissipated as quickly as it emerged, the widespread reach of the 5G-COVID19 conspiracy theory online came to inspire acts of violence in the real world, specifically targeting telecommunication infrastructure. Between April and May 2020 in the United Kingdom alone, almost 90 cell towers were destroyed, primarily through arson and sabotage attacks.⁴³ In addition, during the same time period, just under 50 engineers and other telecommunications workers were physically and verbally attacked by individuals motivated by this conspiracy theory.⁴⁴ By mid-May 2020, at least 16 cell towers in the Netherlands had been targeted in arson attacks.⁴⁵ Around the same time, there were similar reports of cell tower attacks in other European countries, including Ireland, Sweden, Italy, France, Germany, Belgium, and Cyprus.⁴⁶ In May 2020, DHS’s Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) reportedly planned on issuing an industry alert aimed at advising the telecom industry on measures to reduce the risk of attack.⁴⁷ Also, according to ABC News, in May 2020, DHS issued an intelligence report warning about how the 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theory had prompted a wave of global attacks against cell towers, including in the United States.⁴⁸

On far-right extremist chat forums on platforms such as Telegram, the attacks on cellular towers in Europe were celebrated (see Figure 2). These celebratory messages also frequently intermingled with white supremacist and accelerationist ideology, illustrating the connection between conspiracy theories and violent extremism. Some neo-Nazi Telegram channels (see Figure 2) even encouraged users to utilize the 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theory in radicalization efforts, positing that it may be more effective than trying to convince potential recruits that the Holocaust never happened (another notable conspiracy theory that has long motivated neo-Nazi adherents and other white supremacy extremists).



U.S. Court of Appeals
Forwarded messages

Corona Chan News 2020-12-12

4/17/20



Goals: spread the Anti 5G conspiracy theory hard. It's so crazy out there right now 🇺🇸 that folks are highly receptive and looking for answers. Give them something to hate, to blame for all their anger and frustration.

Proof that the system is threatened by the 5G critics is how much they are trying to censor them online. In Canada they want to make it illegal. This leads them to believe they're onto the truth and they double down.

This narrative combining the Coronavirus and 5G is especially potent because many are not inoculated against it very well like they are the Holohoax. They radicalize quickly because the 5G death towers can be found everywhere. They will believe it even more as the bodies continue to pile up during this pandemic 💀 💀

5G Bad! 5G Make You Sick!

Figure 2: Extremist postings related to the 5G conspiracy (Source: Telegram)

Beyond the Grid: Targeting Telecoms

According to researchers with the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), in 2020, terrorist attacks committed by conspiracy theory extremists climbed to 116 from just six the previous year, an increase of 1,833%. Of those 116 attacks spanning countries from North America to Europe and Australia, 96 percent were aimed at damaging telecommunications infrastructure.⁴⁹

Several notable attacks occurred in the United States in 2020. In Tennessee, at least eight cell towers were vandalized between December 2019 and November 2020.⁵⁰ On December 25, 2020, Anthony Quinn Warner detonated a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device in downtown Nashville, Tennessee, close to a commercial AT&T networks facility. The attack killed Warner and injured eight others, as well as caused widespread damage to surrounding buildings and communication networks and service disruptions.⁵¹ An assessment by CISA concluded that the Nashville Christmas Day bombing “caused consumer telephone and internet outages, as well as 911 outages as far as Alabama and Kentucky. The 911 outages impacted some centers for over a week.”⁵²

An assessment by the FBI found that Warner’s choice of location for the explosion had nothing to do with AT&T in particular. The assessment determined the motivation as follows: “Warner’s detonation of the improvised explosive device was an intentional act in an effort to end his own life, driven in part by a totality of life stressors – including paranoia, long-held individualized beliefs adopted from several eccentric conspiracy theories, and the loss of stabilizing anchors and deteriorating interpersonal relationships.”⁵³ While Warner does not appear to have been motivated by the 5G-COVID19 conspiracy theory, the bombing indicates the potential damage and disruption caused by an attack targeting critical infrastructure, such as a telecommunications network facility. Furthermore, it has raised the worrying prospect of inspiring copycat attacks, whether by violent far-right groups or others intent on committing mass harm.

The intermingling of 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theories with anti-Semitism is particularly troubling. That narrative suggests that the global pandemic was part of a diabolical plan by ‘the global elite,’ consisting of the likes of George Soros and Bill Gates, that had supposedly colluded with ‘big pharma’ to introduce mandatory vaccinations that secretly include chips that can track an individual. These microchip implants, in turn, would supposedly be

activated by 5G technology.⁵⁴ In these instances, a conspiracy theory that motivates people to attack critical infrastructure intermingles with long-standing conspiracy theories and disinformation that have historically underpinned acts of violence within the far-right extremist umbrella, creating a dangerous cocktail. In January 2021, the Intelligence Bureau of the New York Police Department (NYPD) reportedly issued an internal report assessing that conspiracy theorists, neo-Nazis, and white supremacists are increasingly targeting telecommunication towers to “incite fear, disrupt essential services, and cause economic damage.”⁵⁵

Conclusion

If organized into a regular campaign with a high operational tempo, violent extremists could inflict very significant damage by targeting critical infrastructure. This appears particularly appealing to groups ascribing to accelerationist ideas, given the prospect of wider social and economic damage. There is a belief in extreme far-right circles that such attacks can topple governments. In February 2023, German police carried out searches against six individuals part of the Reichsbürger network, who are suspected of planning to sabotage the power grid. Allegedly, their goal was to catalyze others to follow suit and generate enough momentum to overthrow the government.⁵⁶

The number of targets, from power grids to telecommunications systems to government facilities, from military installations to public transportation system increases societal vulnerability to these types of attacks. This is particularly the case given the volume of potential targets and their accessibility to the public in many instances, making preventive efforts particularly challenging and dependent on public and private sector entities, the latter often being less familiar or less resourced to address such potential threats. The disruption could be multi-faceted, with potential impacts in communications, the economy, mobility, health services, and other basic human necessities. The commercialization of new technologies, e.g., drones, adds another layer of complexity to the challenge of securing critical infrastructure. The increased ease of availability and lower barriers to entry will complicate efforts to distinguish malevolent from recreational use.

The mounting appeal of accelerationist ideology, and its driving focus on targeting infrastructure, reinforces the need to prioritize protection measures and foster public-private partnership bringing together government and local officials with businesses that often own the infrastructure sites.

The proliferation and mainstreaming of extreme far-right ideologies, conspiracies, and narratives by both public figures and politicians demonstrate the importance and urgency in understanding how the far-right ecosystem interacts with critical infrastructure. The current political outlook in the U.S. and the West more broadly makes monitoring which narratives and conspiracies seem to resonate with the public an imperative, as far-right extremists have proven adept at capitalizing on pre-existing grievances and distrust in institutions to promulgate

their own narratives. As attacks on telecommunications systems have shown, narratives that begin in the online space do not always remain there. Moreover, the speed at which conspiracy theories can spread, particularly in periods of volatility or uncertainty, as seen with the 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy, reinforces the need to understand further how different narratives and ideologies interact and motivate violent extremists to target critical infrastructure. **CTC**

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Substantive Notes

[a] “Parshall and Lynam are currently scheduled to stand trial November in the federal terrorism case. Both have pleaded not guilty. Loomis, now 42, was sentenced in January to four to 20 years in a Nevada prison after reaching a deal with prosecutors and pleading guilty last October to providing material support for the commission of an act of terrorism, a felony.” Rio Yamat, “Vegas terrorism suspect sentenced for sexually abusing girl,” Associated Press, March 15, 2023.

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